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THE BEGINNINGS

Of the

Lutheran Church

IN NORTH CAROLINA

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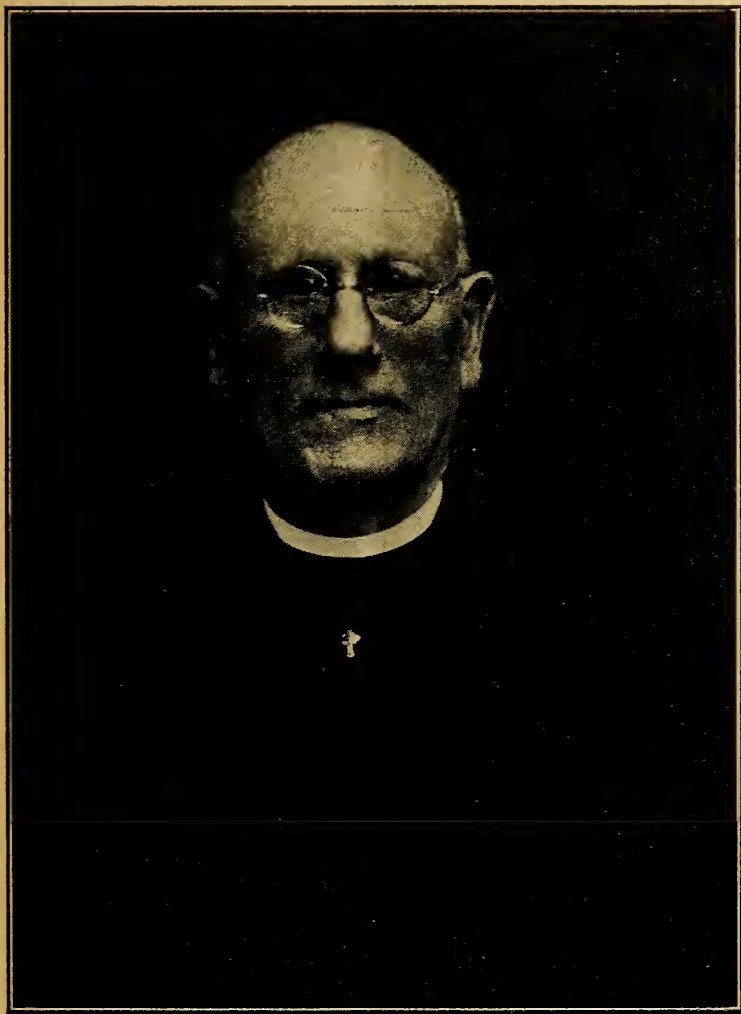
OF NORTH CAROLINA

By REV. GEO. H. COX, D. D.

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THE BEGINNERS OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN NORTH CAROLINA

REV. GEO. H. COX, D. D.

The early history of the Lutheran Church in North Carolina is woven into the very warp and filling of the history of the old North State.

Entering upon its own history at a time when the grand old state of North Carolina was but a province of Great Britain, and, as yet untried and undeveloped, the Lutheran Church came, lived, labored and participated in those grand old constructive times when the very foundations of the Commonwealth were being laid; and has thus been closely identified with the history of the state from the very beginning, impressing its unbounded faith in God and His Word and its genuine piety as that which alone could give stability, character and power.

The history of the Lutheran Church in North Carolina, therefore, though sadly neglected and little known, is worthy of the most careful study.

It was away back in the dim, far distant past, nearly two hundred years ago, a generation before the Revolutionary War, about the time of, in fact two or three years before Muhlenberg came to America in 1742, when this section of country was but an immense wilderness, when there were no railroads, no steamboats, no roads, only Indian trails, when the country was inhabited by wild Indians and the native denizens of its primeval forests, that our forefathers, in Penn., finding it

difficult to secure farm-lands and homes at such prices as to them seemed possible to pay, gathered together their holdings, packed them into their old scoop-bed wagons, and driving their herds of live-stock, started out to find homes and farm-lands in the naturally rich mountains and valleys of the provinces of Virginia and North Carolina of which glowing reports had reached them.

Leaving Pennsylvania, they traveled down through Maryland, across the James River, up the beautiful Shenandoah valley of Virginia, and over the mountains into what is now known as the Piedmont Section of North Carolina.

Today, one hundred and eighty-three years later, the route that they travelled can easily be traced by the many Lutheran settlements along on either side of the way.

At that time there were no well-kept public highways, with signboards directing the traveller on his way, but only the Indian trails winding in and out, over hill and dale and through dense and dark forests, and often difficult to follow. Then, there were no bridges spanning the rivers and creeks, but each stream must be forded, and that, often where the ford was rough and rocky, and through deep and rushing waters, with high, precipitous banks on either side.

And not only were these natural difficulties to be overcome, but they were compelled to be constantly on the watch to guard against and repel the sudden attacks of the unfriendly Indians through whose territory they must pass.

Thus it was that our forefathers, through toils and labors, exposures and trials, difficulties and dangers, came to this section of North Carolina. To

us of the present day, in the enjoyment of comforts, conveniences and luxuries, as we are, it is very difficult for us to have any real conception of the heroism, courage, strength and endurance of those hardy pioneers of our Lutheran church in North Carolina. But, in the providence of God, here they came, a devout Spartan band; and here they settled when the foundations of this grand old state of North Carolina were being laid; and here they organized their congregations and, side by side with their homes, erected their churches, trusting in God for pastors, though they knew not whence nor how they were to come.

Thus, somewhere between the years of 1740 and 1745, the first three Lutheran churches were established; viz. St. John Church in Salisbury, Zion, commonly known as Organ Church in Rowan County, and St. John Church in Cabarrus then Mecklenburg County. So far as can be ascertained, these three congregations were all organized about the same time, that is somewhere about the year 1745, and very soon thereafter they erected their churches and held regular services, conducted by their church officers. But they had no pastor for more than twenty-five years. Without the regular means of grace, that is, with no one to preach the gospel or administer the holy sacraments to them, except at long intervals when some travelling preacher would pass through the country, and they not Lutherans and often unreliable and irresponsible, it naturally followed that their young people were growing up in comparative ignorance of the things most essential, resulting in a low state of Spirituality and in great laxity of morals. Under such circumstances we can easily understand how anxious they must have been to have their own pastor to minister to them in holy things. Accordingly, during those

twenty-five years, they had repeatedly appealed to their brethren in Pennsylvania; but they also were sorely in need of pastors for themselves, and therefore, were unable to assist them.

We must remember that, at that time, there was no organized synod in America except the Ministerium of Pennsylvania which had recently been organized and no schools or seminaries where men could be prepared for the Lutheran ministry; and that the only possible source from which to secure a pastor was from the church in the fatherland. We can easily imagine how earnestly they must have prayed that the Lord would send laborers into this part of his vineyard, and how often and anxiously they must have discussed the question in their family circles, and how the three congregations must have often consulted as to the ways and means and possibilities of securing a pastor from the far-away fatherland. But between them and that land there were three thousand miles of a deep and mighty ocean, and the dreadful hardships and dangers of such an ocean voyage, and the great sacrifice and expense of such a journey. But something must be done. Their spiritual need must, in some way, be supplied. It seemed impossible that things could longer continue as they were. They very well knew that, to send letters or petitions to Europe, asking for a pastor and a school-teacher, would accomplish but little if anything; and that, therefore, the only way that seemed to have any promise of success was, to send a delegation that could make personal appeal to the hearts of their brethren in the fatherland, describe the needs and necessities of their congregations, answer questions as to the country and its conditions, and petition for contributions to help in establishing and carrying on the work in this new land of America. But how this could be

accomplished and who could or would go they, for a long time, were unable to decide. Then, when it seemed to them that their darkest hour had come, God intervened by putting it into the hearts of two brave, true, consecrated christian men, to offer their services, their time, their means, and, if need be, their lives, to make the long and hazardous journey at their own expense.

Their offer was gratefully and joyfully accepted and Christopher Lyerly of St. John Church of Cabarrus County, and Christopher Rendelman of Organ Church were commissioned to go to Germany in search of a regular pastor and a well qualified school-teacher, and to ask for financial assistance in supporting them. They were instructed to apply to the Consistory of Hannover, in preference to any other, because at that time the Province of North Carolina was under the government of the king of England, who, at the same time, was Elector of Hannover.

Supplied with the necessary credentials and especially with one from Governor Tryon who was, at that time, governor of the province of North Carolina bearing the great seal of the province, and with a letter of recommendation from him to the "Society for the spread of the gospel in foreign parts," at London, the commissioners left their homes in 1772, traveled horseback to Charleston, South Carolina, made a safe voyage across the Atlantic and went, first, to England where they were most cordially received and kindly treated. The Missionary Society to which they appealed heartily endorsed their cause. The king of England and numbers of the English noblemen gave liberally of their means, and St. James' Lutheran Chapel in London, gave them a handsome sum of money for that day, in all amounting to more than eight hundred dollars.

In Germany they found the same hearty welcome awaiting them, where, beside offering of money, they were presented with many Bibles, Hymn-books, Catechisms and other publications; and to Organ Church was presented a communion set which is still in the possession of the congregation.

The Consistory of Hannover readily granted their petition for a pastor and school-teacher, and at once, officially called and commissioned the Rev. Adolphus Nussman as pastor and Mr. John Godfried Arndt as school-teacher, and also pledged the institution to serve the brethren in North Carolina in the future, by sending them additional ministers upon application. The commissioners Lysterly and Rendelman, accompanied by Nussman and Arndt, soon started on their return to America, where they arrived in safety in the fall of 1773.

What a blessed work those two laymen accomplished! God alone knows what might have become of the Lutheran Church in North Carolina if those two had not volunteered to undertake the voyage to Europe! We of today should honor their memory as the preservers of Lutheranism in North Carolina.

Thus the Rev. Adolphus Nussman became the pioneer Lutheran minister of North Carolina. Like Luther, he was a converted Roman Catholic monk of the Franciscan order. He had been converted to christianity some years before he came to America. After his conversion he completed his literary and theological studies in the Georgia Augusta Department of the University of Goettingen, and was ordained to the Gospel Ministry. He was thirty-three years old when he accepted the call to the Lutheran churches in North Carolina. He was a learned, devout and self-sacrificing christian minister, and soundly Lutheran both in faith and practice. He

was a man who won and held the confidence, praise and love, not only of those with whom he lived and labored, but of all who had any knowledge of him. He easily could have risen to places of honor and distinction and power among his own people, in his own native land, but for the love of Christ and His kingdom, willingly gave himself to severe self-sacrificing labors among the destitute Lutherans of North Carolina, amid the privations and hardships of a pioneer life, in a foreign land.

Upon his arrival here in North Carolina, he, at first, made his home in the vicinity of Organ Church, and served as pastor of that church, and St. John Church in Salisbury, and occasionally visited and ministered to the spiritual needs of St. John Church in Cabarrus County.

The school-teacher, Arndt, taught the children of Organ church for two years, and was then ordained to the Gospel Ministry, and became the second pastor of Organ Church, the Rev. Nussman removing to Cabarrus County and becoming the pastor of St. John Church in that County, which he served faithfully and well until his death, November 8, 1794, being a little over fifty five years of age. His earthly remains lie in the old graveyard of St. John Church. An old slate-stone formerly marked the spot, upon which was a German inscription, the translation of which is "For me to live is Christ; to die is gain. The memory of the righteous is blessed. Here lie the remains of the Faithful preacher, Adolphus Nussman; Born in Germany, August, 1739, Died November 3, 1794." The old slate-stone was rapidly crumbling away and was broken off at the ground, when, a few years ago, some interested persons replaced it with a simple marble head-stone. Otherwise the grave might soon have

been lost. The old slate-stone is preserved in St. John Church. This synod could not do a more worthy deed than to erect a handsome monument at the grave of the first pioneer Lutheran preacher in North Carolina.

While living in Cabarrus County, Nussman was united in marriage with Miss Barbara Lysterly, a daughter of Christopher Lysterly, one of the commissioners who was instrumental in bringing him over to America. With her he lived in peace and happiness for many years, and was the father of several sons and daughters, none of whom are now living; but his lineal descendants, to the fourth and fifth generations, are still living in North Carolina, of whom I have had the honor of being their pastor.

While he was pastor of St. John Church he was very active in Missionary work, making frequent visits among the Lutherans in what are now Davidson, Guilford, Orange, Stokes and Forsythe Counties, preaching the Word wherever opportunity offered, baptizing the children, catechising the young people, and organizing numbers of congregations that are still connected with the synod.

Mr. John Godfried Arndt, the school-teacher, as already stated, came to North Carolina with Nussman in 1773. He was a graduate of the Teacher's Seminary in the city of Hannover, in Germany and was appointed as teacher for North Carolina on October 16, 1772. Upon his arrival in North Carolina, he immediately began the work of instructing the children of Organ Church; which work he continued until 1775, that is for two years, when, on August 28th of that same year, he was ordained to the Gospel Ministry by the Rev. Joachim Beulow of Saluda

River of South Carolina, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church of Newberry County, South Carolina, and as he signed the certificate of ordination, "Missionary and Inspector of South and North Carolina."

No records have ever been found as to who this man was, nor upon what authority he acted as "Missionary and Inspector." The only thing known of him beside that which I have stated is that, at one time, he was a clerk in a store in Charleston, South Carolina.

Arndt thus became the first Lutheran Minister ever ordained in North Carolina, and the second pastor of Organ Church. He served that congregation for eleven years and then removed to Lincoln County, then called Tryon, and became the acknowledged founder of the Lutheran Church west of the Catawba River, where he lived and labored until his death, July 9, 1807, at the age of sixty-six years, six months and twenty-eight days.

He was one of the organizers of the North Carolina Synod and was its first president. For several years he was perfectly blind, but continued his ministrations up to his last illness and death. A maiden daughter, Elizabeth, was his house-keeper, his wife having preceded him to the spirit land, and also his guide and assistant, leading him wherever he went and reading the scripture lessons and hymns in his church services. He was a thoroughly consecrated minister, deeply pious, devoted wholly to his calling, and was loved and honored by all who knew him. His earthly remains were interred under the pulpit of what was then known as the "Old White Meeting-house" in Lincolnton, of which he had been pastor for many years. Later, in 1892, the church was destroyed by fire. In rebuilding, the new church occupied the old site, so that his remains are

still under the pulpit of that church which is now known as Emmanuel Church, on S. Aspin street, Lincolnton, N. C.

In 1894 I became pastor of Organ Church. At that time there were twenty or more very old people in the congregation; none of them less than eighty, and several of them, between ninety and one hundred years of age; and one of them ninety-eight.

I had frequent conversations with them concerning the early history of Organ Church. The memory of some of them reached back to the year 1800, and they remembered things related to them by their parents, who personally knew the Rev. Arndt.

They told me that he was very particular as to his personal appearance, always being neatly dressed according to the fashions of the day, and wearing gloves wherever he went; something very unusual among the hardy people of that time. He is said to have been a very handsome man, Chesterfieldian in his manners, of fair complexion, blue eyes and light auburn hair which hung in ringlets reaching his shoulders, and of which he was very proud.

It is impossible to rightly estimate the legacy of heroism bequeathed to us by those two pioneers of Lutheranism in North Carolina. Their vigorous faith, their christian heroism, their holy zeal and their self-sacrificing labors are deserving of our most profound gratitude and admiration. Eternity alone can reveal the good that they accomplished and the many souls that they led into the saving knowledge of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, and who are today rejoicing together with them in the blissful home on high. There is no rule of man by which to compute the results of the faithful labores

of God's ministering servants. Not until we have shuffled off this mortal coil and have gone to the bourn whence no traveller returns, and have been made to stand face to face, and see eye to eye, can we know the whole story. To them, no doubt, laboring as they did under such difficulties and disadvantages, their success often seemed doubtful, and, at best dreadfully slow; but their work was well done, and, under the blessings of Almighty God, was lasting and today, after the lapse of one hundred and fifty years, we know, can see and are enjoying the fruits of their labors.

No one can read the story of their sufferings, isolation, incessant toil and privations without receiving instruction and profit. They were, indeed, devout and consecrated men whose precious memory should be cherished by us who are their successors in the great work of preaching the truth of God's Word, as it is interpreted by our dear old Lutheran Church. God help each one of us faithfully to learn the lesson of their lives and labors, and, strengthened thereby, to go forth to the work that is committed to our hands with renewed faith, zeal and energy, and to faithfully perform the work given us to do, and thus hand down to the generations that are to come, as they have left for us, a history that shall grow brighter and brighter as the centuries go by!

